

Peter Probst & Gerd Spittler

From an Anthropology of Astonishment to a  
Critique of Anthropology's Common Sense:

An Exploration of the Notion of Local Vitality  
in Africa



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IAS: Herbert Popp (Geschäftsführender Direktor)

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SFB/FK 560: Brigitte Bühler-Probst (wissenschaftliche Koordination)

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## Bayreuth African Studies Online

ISSN 1861-2350

No. 1 (March 2005)

Peter Probst and Gerd Spittler: From an Anthropology of Astonishment to a Critique of Anthropology's Common Sense: An Exploration of the Notion of Local Vitality in Africa



**SFB<sub>560</sub>FK**

LOCAL ACTION IN AFRICA IN THE  
CONTEXT OF GLOBAL INFLUENCES



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## Preface

This paper is the introduction to the volume “Between Resistance and Expansion. Explorations of Local Vitality in Africa” edited by Peter Probst and Gerd Spittler (Berlin, Hamburg, Münster: LIT, 2004). The volume grew from an international symposium on “Local Vitality and the Globalization of the Local” convened by the Humanities Collaborative Research Center “Local Action in Africa in the Context of Global Influences” (SFB/FK 560) at Bayreuth University in May 2002. The paper and the attached table of contents may stimulate interest in casting a look at the entire volume.

Be it the vitality of African art, African popular culture or African religious ideas – invoking the notion of vitality has become a common practice in Africanist discourses. Most often, the reason for this is to emphasize the unexpected and astonishing strength of certain cultural fields of Africa. But what is really meant with the notion of local vitality beyond its metaphorical and mainly rhetorical usage, beyond the seemingly unforeseen and unexpected? The authors locate the answer to this question in a hidden, though powerful paradox. Celebrating local vitality thus means to celebrate the falsification of one of anthropology's most cherished assumptions. When we ask about local vitality, we are asking about the vitality of weak units in the face of structurally different and more powerful ones. At the same time however, the invocation of vitality points to the problematic of such a perspective and the way how anthropology is constantly seeking to call this assumption into question. It is argued to acknowledge this paradox and move beyond established scenarios of subjugation and subjection by a critical investigation of the variations of local agency in the context of debates on identity and self-assertion, locality and appropriation, and rivalry and resistance.

Bayreuth, March 2005 , P.P. & G.S.

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# **From an Anthropology of Astonishment to a Critique of Anthropology's Common Sense: An Exploration of the Notion of Local Vitality in Africa**

*Peter Probst and Gerd Spittler*

## **Approaching an Anthropology of Astonishment**

In an unpublished paper entitled "Keywords in Transnational Anthropology" Ulf Hannerz recently noted: "When you take an intellectual ride on a metaphor, it is important that you know where to get off" (Hannerz 1997: 6). Hannerz's sound advice is concerned with currently popular metaphors. It implies that some mileage exists, that a certain intellectual distance has been covered already. Nothing of this can be said of the ride we intend to embark on in the following. Rather than getting off of it, what we set out to do in the following is to take a fresh ride on a concept which was believed to have surpassed its explanatory mileage long since. Instead of flows, boundaries and hybrids, words Hannerz reflects upon, the one which stands in the center of this volume is "vitality." Truly, it is an old idea, yet the history which is behind this volume is a very recent one.

In May 2002 the Humanities Collaborative Research Center on "Local Action in Africa in the Context of Global Influences," a new trans-disciplinary research program funded by the German Research Foundation and firmly embedded within the field of African studies at Bayreuth University, organized a conference to discuss one of its conceptual anchors. Entitled "Local Vitality and the Localization of the Global," the conference was intended to probe into the notion of local vitality in Africa.

Considering the current wave of Afro-pessimism, we were well aware that when put into this context a notion such as local vitality might sound rather odd, even strangely exotic. After all we cannot ignore the fact that (not only) Western perceptions of Africa are characterized by images of

poverty, hunger, sickness, corruption, anarchy and civil war. Vitality? Well, perhaps only in some quaint folkloristic sense, but not really. The still dominant perspective is that Africa remains cut off from globalization, at most supplying the world with top athletes, musicians, exotic beauties, wild animals, and raw materials.

No doubt the negative features exist, but the consistency with which they are invoked again and again should make us aware that the necessary critique as to their causes is in danger of losing its credibility in the face of claims that, for example, the field of African studies finances its fine intellectual mansions largely through the pessimistic pictures it paints. Given such a scenario, the attempt to come up with something like "local vitality" really does not fit into the picture. If it does fit at all, then only as something which could be labeled an *anthropology of astonishment*.<sup>1</sup>

When for example Karin Barber writes about the "vitality of popular culture" in Africa (Barber 1997: 7), or Richard and Sally Price show the "cultural vitality" of Maroon arts in the African Diaspora (Price and Price 1999), their understanding of vitality is primarily a metaphor of Astonishment. Seen from this perspective, the use of "vitality" or "vital" denotes first and foremost a form of difference. It marks a contrast to popular images and understandings of modernity and globalization and the way these ideas are thought to change and have an effect upon the world we live in. To identify and label cultural phenomena as vital thus signifies something unexpected, something beyond the assumed and foreseen, in any case something which is more than mere survival, an energy surplus so to speak. As Sandra Barnes notes in her introduction to *Africa's Ogun*, a collection of essays about the spatial spread and peculiar vitality of the Yoruba deity Ogun:

"More than 70 million African and New World people participate in, or are closely familiar with, religious systems that include Ogun. Yet the claim that a god from a comparatively small religious faith, particularly one stemming from a non-literate tradition, flourishes in spite of the overwhelming dominance of such large global religions as Islam and Christianity jars our expectation." (Barnes 1997: 1)

Is the anthropological reference to vitality then just another expression of current "globalism" (Englund 2002)? Or is it, as James Fernandez (1991: 1) noted some time ago, rather an illustration of the more general fact that "we are living at a very metaphorical moment in the human sciences?" Surely, situating the notion of vitality in the context of current discourses on modernity and globalization makes sense. After all, a distinct feature these

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<sup>1</sup> We would like to express our thanks to Richard Price who suggested changing our originally rather pale "ethnography of surprise" into this more appropriate and elegant phrase.

discourses is their reliance on metaphors. “Flows,” “closures,” “networks,” “boundaries,” “landscapes,” “metissage,” “rhizomes”: the list is endless, with new terms arising nearly every day. Yet in contrast to these tropes, vitality is different. Powerful and evocative, it stands on its own. Its employment does not go beyond a strictly metaphorical usage. Even in the above mentioned study by Richard and Sally Price, though featuring prominently in the subtitle of their book, vitality is not elaborated as an analytical concept. Mentioned only in passing, without any explicit thought given to it, the word passes in anonymity like the shadow of a hidden debate, not fit to be brought out into the open.

No doubt, there is a certain elusiveness involved. The very resonances the word vitality evokes make it difficult to come up with a more analytical understanding of it. A certain boundary seems to exist which prevents a rational approach to the questions concerned. Trying to cross this boundary means finding oneself in a world of the obvious and the obscure, the speculative and the exact, the inchoate and the final. Attempting to enter this difficult terrain means unraveling a multitude of different yet deeply entangled motives which – loosely bound together into a complex narrative about the mysteries of life – have left a distinct mark on both the history of anthropological thought and that of European politics.

## Facets of a Thought Style

Other peoples' answers to the question of what is behind life, what actually makes a person, an animal or a plant have life, have captured the anthropological interest from the outset. The use of these ethnographic findings to come up with a critique of modernity under the label of “vitalism” is, however, a different story altogether.

More a “thought style” in the sense of Mary Douglas (1996) than an elaborated theory, vitalism has many facets.<sup>2</sup> Certainly, the world of the Middle Ages, with its dominance of Christian theology, was one. As an appeal to that world and in this sense an undercurrent of the Enlightenment, Romanticism was another. Intuition, imagination and coherence, concepts prevalent in Romantic thought, articulated a distinctly skeptical attitude towards the universalistic ideas of the Enlightenment. Its negative effects were thought to be intellectualism and rationalism, cultural oppression and moral decadence. Given the politically still very much fragmented situation

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<sup>2</sup> What we leave out is the prehistory of vitalism usually drawn all the way back to Aristotle (cf. Driesch 1941).



of late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> century Europe, critics of their time resented the colonial and etatistic politics of France and England as “state machines” (Herder) and likened them to the imperial *gestus* of ancient Rome. Just as Rome had eroded and leveled the cultural wealth and organic strength of the various cultures within its empire, the new imperial powers would do so in Africa, Asia and Europe. For writers like Herder and Rousseau, each culture needed to be understood as a unique work of art, expressed in oral lore and customs. As more and more emphasis was put on the performative expressions of the “folk” such as songs, fairy tales, poetry and other, notably oral genres, folklore studies became a privileged source of European nationalism, with the idea of organic unity becoming more or less a substitute for the lack of political unity. The *organic*, formerly a rather mechanical concept, came to be seen as a living thing, a kind of metaphysical principle, active in the way it shaped the specific form and style of cultures, but invisible and therefore only perceivable through intuition and empathy.<sup>3</sup>

The 19<sup>th</sup> century constituted a new context for the thought style of vitalism. With the growing success of the natural sciences, particularly in the fields of medicine, biology and chemistry, the increasing awareness of the effects of industrialization and urbanization, and the restorative tendencies on the level of politics, the situation shifted. What was formerly the life endowed “folk” now became the life endowed “state,” demanding “Lebensraum” from the outside world and “Volksgesundheit” from the inside. The old regime of philosophy and the fine arts came to be replaced by the new regime of biology, medicine and, to some extent, anthropology. Indicated and expressed by phrases like Durkheim’s understanding of the horde as “the real social protoplasma,” a somatization of culture set in, with programs in social hygiene arising, aimed at cleansing the social body of the pathological side effects of progress and modernization in terms of crime, poverty and mass formation. Being in the grip of “bio power” (Foucault), the politics of an aesthetic education, something which was in the late 18th century still thought to be an emancipating civil force, were recognized as having become obsolete. Instead a vitalistic, action-driven discourse – most prominently articulated by Nietzsche – began to dominate the humanities, compensating as it were both the decline of the political role of the citizens in general and the acute individual experience of cultural stagnation, freeze and deadlock. Surely, anthropological voices were not yet to be heard in this atmosphere. Pushed forward by the processes outlined above and thus

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<sup>3</sup> On the role of empathy, particularly in the history of German anthropology, see Fritz Kramer (1985).

dominated mostly by doctors, psychologists and geographers, its self-understanding was indebted to progress and evolution. Yet with the social gaps widening and the old political structures starting to collapse the situation changed again, giving rise to a new wave of vitalism.

At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century vitalism reached its peak. As Helmuth Plessner in his classic study *Die Stufen des Organischen und der Mensch* noted in 1928: "Each period finds its redemptive word. The terminology of the 18th century culminated in the concept of reason, that of the 19<sup>th</sup> century in the concept of evolution, and the present in the concept of life" (Plessner 1975: 3). Admittedly, the approaches varied. Driesch's *Philosophie des Organischen*, Koffka and Köhler's theory of *Gestalt*, Husserl's idea of *Lebenswelt* and Bergson's *élan vital* – all of these concepts differed from one another. While some followed a metaphysical path, others were more down to earth, focusing on the basis of common sense. Yet what all had in common, what bound them together, was their insistence that on the basic level of human existence, i.e. life, coherence and unity prevail. It is here that Plessner's redemptive quality of the concept of life displays its full meaning. In a cultural milieu characterized by the experience of fragmentation, dissolution and "transcendental homelessness" (Lukacs), the reference to life served as a cultural response to the features of (aesthetic) modernity so lucidly analyzed by Simmel and Benjamin in their studies of early 20<sup>th</sup> century urban life in Berlin and Paris. That anthropology did not remain unaffected by this is not surprising. In fact, inspired and permeated by "life" as a sort of root metaphor of its time, early 20<sup>th</sup> century anthropology not only came up with its own vitalistic concepts.<sup>4</sup> Some of these concepts were further merged with political ideologies. As we have remarked elsewhere (Probst 2000, Probst, Deutsch and Schmidt 2002), the experience of modernity in Europe had its parallels with the experience of colonial modernity outside the West. Thus Leo Frobenius' "cultural morphology" found its way into Senghor and Césaire's concept of "negritude" in the same way as Levy-Bruhl's ideas of "primitive mentality" were integrated into Placide Tempel's "Bantu philosophy." Both sides argued for the ontological difference of the African mind, using the reference to vitality as a sort of conceptual tool whose own intellectual history allowed it to find and formulate a position of difference very much along the same lines as the concept had once been developed in Europe.

Given this situation, it would seem an appropriate inversion of history that the end of vitalism in Europe appears to have coincided with the end of colonialism in Africa. After all, in 1968, thus during a time when most African states had already achieved independence, the second edition of

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<sup>4</sup> See the discussion in the next section.

Plessner's *Stufen des Organischen* appeared. Exactly 40 years after he had declared the concept of life a remedy to the problems of his time, Plessner now declared, no less programmatically: "The times of vitalism have passed forever" (Plessner 1975: 349). Today, deep into the post-colonial epoch, the verdict has not changed. The advances of modern genetics and biochemistry, the public debates on virtual impregnation and the stunning consequences of new image technologies show the obsolescence of explaining the processes of life by way of any metaphysically conceived "life force." Furthermore the notion of the "organic" as a natural, homogeneous entity unspoiled by foreign influences is no longer tenable. The experience of fragmentation, pluralism and dissolution, once the signature of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, has not only survived but has become the dominant emblem of our postcolonial time, thus making any attempt to revitalize vitalism predestined to fail. What then should a renewed recall to the language of vitality offer? What new insights could it provide?

## Resistance or Creativity: Disputes over Data

Contrary to the impression given above, we hold that the new insights are still the old ones, though they must be reformulated. The early debate on peasant studies can be seen as a case in point. As we will outline in the following, the question whether to see peasant communities as vital depends not only on the kind of theory employed. It turns out to also be instructive with respect to notions of resistance and creativity.

In 1955 Eric Wolf published an article which was to become famous in the anthropological debate on village communities. *Types of Latin American Peasantry: A Preliminary Discussion* (Wolf 1955) criticized the notion common among anthropologists of Wolf's time that Indian village communities were traditional relics of pre-Columbian times. Instead he explained their development and persistence as being due to certain internal and external factors. External factors included, for example, the fact that closed village units were in the interest of the Spanish crown. Among the internal influencing factors were common land ownership, equality and equalizing strategies within the village community, defensive ignorance, limited consumption, and the cult of poverty. As Wolf argued, these features were closely inter-linked. For example, defensive ignorance prevented penetration of threatening information from the outside world, thus preserving limited consumption and the cult of poverty.

Surely, the village communities described by Wolf were not just passive victims but took an active part in shaping their lives. And yet Wolf would

not have described them as “vital.” This term could be more aptly applied to the second type, the open community. Until then anthropologists had shown little interest in this type of community. Here, Wolf based his arguments mainly on his own field research in Puerto Rico, where he had found an open community with production dominated by cash crops (coffee, cocoa, bananas and sugar cane). The peasants were not traditionalists but status-seekers who accumulated individual wealth. Later, Wolf also applied his analyses to Java. As in Central America, we find in Java “closed communities” which cut themselves off from the rest of the world (Wolf 1957). When six years later Clifford Geertz presented his analysis of agriculture in Java (Geertz 1963), he developed a similar argument without, however, mentioning that of Wolf. During the colonial period in Indonesia there was neither revolution nor evolution in agriculture, but rather “involution.” Geertz borrowed the concept of involution from the anthropologist Alexander Goldenweiser, who had used the term to describe a process in which a cultural pattern is not transformed, but becomes increasingly complex within the same framework. Goldenweiser referred to architecture and cited the late Gothic style as a telling example of his concept of involution. Geertz saw such a process of involution at work as well in the Javanese irrigation culture of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, which he characterized as “increasing tenacity of basic pattern; internal elaboration and ornateness; technical hairsplitting, and unending virtuosity” (Geertz 1963: 82). Can this be interpreted as vitality? Geertz came to a negative conclusion: “They represent a reaction – for all its oft-admired ingeniousness, almost wholly defensive – to the twin pressures of a rising population and a superimposed plantation economy” (Geertz 1963: 101). Unlike the late Gothic style, this was not decadence but a tragic situation. For it prevented Java from being able to develop modern forms of agriculture. The result was a “shared poverty” among the peasants. The process of involution was not restricted to agriculture, but also affected family life, social stratification, political organization and religious practice. Both authors analyzed local action within the framework of a capitalist or colonial economic system. The dynamic influences radiate from the centers and the colonial powers. The authors saw the peasants of Latin America, Africa and Asia as actors, not as victims. Yet this action is not the same thing as vitality. It is subject to strong external and internal restrictions and is essentially defensive. The situation of the peasants is always characterized by poverty.

Another more recent interpretation has been offered by Robert Netting. In 1993 Netting published *Smallholders, Householders. Farm Families and the Ecology of Intensive, Sustainable Agriculture* (Netting 1993), a study based upon his own field experience and on a comprehensive evaluation of

other studies (Netting 1968; 1981). Following the cultural and ecological tradition of Julian Steward and the agro-economic tradition of Esther Boserup, Netting investigated the type of intensive agriculture practiced by smallholders all over the world, which included the Javanese peasants studied by Geertz and Wolf. Characteristically, this intensive agriculture does not involve the use of sophisticated equipment or machines, but hard labor, manual skill, and excellent ecological knowledge. Netting and Geertz largely agree in their descriptions of this system, but the conclusions they draw are diametrically opposed. Where Geertz sees defensive practices at work, Netting finds creativity. Where Geertz claims involution, Netting sings the praises of intensive agriculture, in which knowledge, Industriousness, sustainability and satisfaction are united. According to Netting, this kind of agriculture certainly has a future. Netting and Geertz thus have different conceptions of vitality. Industriousness, skill, accurate observation of nature, powers of invention, and modest needs are signs of vitality for Netting, while Geertz considers them defensive reactions.

Obviously when moving from metaphor to theory we need more precise models if we want to understand these processes. In addition, we have to take into consideration the time perspective in the concept of vitality. What may appear to be vital in the short term is perhaps not so in the long term. Implicitly or explicitly, assumptions about the historical context, about evolution, development, modernization, etc. play a role in the analysis. Last but not least, in order to understand the generative dynamics of cultural change we have to focus not only on the final forms, but also on the concrete activities which give rise to them.

## Revival and Revision

Today, both the biological and metaphysical legacies of vitalism have been put aside. Instead, new concepts ranging from “creativity” and “subjectivity” to “embodiment” and “emplacement” have taken over, expressing not only the basic difference between the cultural and the physiological but also the emergence of action-centered against system approaches. The level where these concepts operate is thus lower than that of the macro-anthropological models which dominated in the past. Yet the questions the vitality metaphor refers to remain. No doubt they are basic ones, and it might well be that anthropology, having become skeptical – or perhaps timid – of grand visions, has turned them more into a sort of hidden meta-narrative where the force of their vexing problems is more concealed in metaphorical allusions than pursued in the open. How do cultures manage

to display their presence over time and space? What makes them distinct? What accounts for the different fields and forms of vitality? Not all domains of social life are equally vital. If a metaphysical principle has to be ruled out and organicistic and mechanistic notions of "culture as energy" (White 1944) acknowledged as having been politically misused, what else can we draw upon? All these questions continue to occupy us, perhaps now more than ever before. Indeed, there are good reasons to argue that the debate on globalization owes its prominence not least to the very fact that it has put these questions back on the agenda of the social sciences.

Referring to this notion of revival, Marilyn Strathern noted a few years ago: "It sometimes feels that we are closer to the beginning of the century than to the end of it" (Strathern 1995: 24). Strathern's feeling can even be extended another hundred years back. The way, for example, globalization is associated with the West and here in particular with the United States' version of aggressive capitalist imperialism in many popular discussions is strangely reminiscent of the way early 19<sup>th</sup> century Germany likened France and England to ancient Rome as decadent imperial powers.<sup>5</sup> Given this odd similarity, it is probably not all that surprising that our own attempt to probe into the difficult notion of local vitality began with a discussion the roots of which lie in that very time as well.

What we have taken as our starting point is a sociolinguistic whose origins, it may be claimed, are hidden in the early Romantic interest in the relationship between language and ethnic identity, but whose current form was developed in the late 1970s. Conventionally abbreviated ELVT, short for "Ethnolinguistic Vitality Theory," the concept was closely linked to debates on ethnic and social identity. As a result, its originally formulated aim was to define "which makes a group likely to behave as a distinctive and active collective entity in intergroup situations" (Giles et al. 1977: 308). In the course of time the theory was further developed, and it now plays an important role in sociolinguistic discourses on ethnic identity and multiculturalism in the United States, Canada and England (Fishman 2002 and Dor 2004).

Given this regional focus, transferring the theory to the African context is certainly problematic (see Owens in this volume). Without ignoring the difficulties involved, we nevertheless believe that something can be learned from ELVT. What we took as our starting position were mainly three points. Firstly, vitality cannot be taken as a premise but needs to be understood as an open, empirical question. Secondly, in order to address this question it is useful to take up a comparative perspective focusing on the relationship between different units. Thirdly, speaking about vitality makes sense only

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<sup>5</sup> For a new post-9/11 version of this comparison see Bender (2003).

when we take into account that there is also something like non-vitality. Otherwise vitality would not differ from other kinds of action.

As will become apparent in the following, not all the papers presented during the symposium worked under these assumptions. Given the complexity of the issues involved, this is hardly surprising. Disputes as to the usefulness of the concept of vitality were bound to and indeed did arise. Yet the insights these disputes provided surpassed simple negative assessments and gave way to a better understanding of the matters in question. In the following we want to outline the main themes which came up and which also structure the content of the book.

## **Vitality and Identity**

Jonathan Owens sets the stage by questioning the applicability of ethnolinguistic vitality theory and the specific features of Western identity politics out of which it evolved for the African context. As he argues, ELVT grew out of a political milieu in Western Europe and North America which set highly politicized ethnolinguistic groups against each other. The analytical concepts of the theory, emphasizing well-profiled group-based boundaries (in-group / out-group, subordinate / dominant, etc.), favor the conflictual dimension of multilingualism. Against this background the African context would appear to be an anomaly in ELVT theorizing. On the basis of his own field research in northeast Nigeria, Owens shows that what we find here are complex linguistic societies which promote a stable multilingualism, often with multiple lingua francas. In such a context smaller ethnolinguistic groups are not necessarily threatened in the face of politically or demographically dominant ones. Rather, as Owens argues, complex linguality seems to be conducive to the maintenance of minority languages.

A concrete example of Owens' argument is Klaudia Dombrowsky-Hahn and Gabriele Slezak's investigation of the linguistic situation in Banfora, a town in southern Burkina Faso. As the authors argue, contrary to many studies of urban linguistics, what is taking place in Banfora is neither homogenization nor polarization. Instead a process of contextual hierarchicalization has set in whereby – due to the continuous flow of migrants returning from the Côte d'Ivoire – the autochthonous languages of Kar and Cerma have not been abandoned, but have instead become incorporated into a complex linguistic mix complementing French and Dyula.

Focusing on this mix not in a linguistic but a tourist setting in their contribution, Ingo Bartha and Marko Scholze deal with the interaction

between Western tourists and Berber and Tuareg souvenir vendors in Niger and Morocco. As the authors show, for the Berbers and Tuareg the interaction with the foreign tourists is viewed as a kind of hunting; in fact the word Tuareg use for those among them who try to make their living by selling handicraft to tourists is *chasse-touriste*, stemming from the French *chasser les touristes* (hunting tourists). Berbers and Tuareg thus try to shape and exploit the presence of the tourists to suit their own wants and needs. Being acutely aware of the tourists' expectations and desires, what both the so-called Berber *bazaarists* and the *chasse-touristes* create and perform is a specific cultural milieu which is realized as a necessary condition for successful economic transactions. Similar to the situation in Banfora, the social effect of these interactions for the Berber and Tuareg communities is an increasing diversification, here however not in terms of linguistic but of economic domains.

What happens to these aspects of one's own home culture when living abroad is a question Cordula Weißköppel addresses in her contribution. Writing about the members of the Sudanese diaspora in Berlin, she is interested in "strategies of survival" developed there. At the center of her paper stands Walid, a Sudanese snack bar owner in eastern Berlin. Focusing on the specific Sudanese ambience Walid has created in his establishment, Weißköppel makes use of the notion of "presence" in order to show how he is vitalizing his Sudanese culture of origin. Aware of the risks of essentialism, she operates with more careful ideas like instrumentalization and imagination. Yet rather than leaving the results of such "strategies" open, she makes it clear that they indicate a resource-like Sudanese identity geared towards survival in a typical diasporic setting marked by internal ambivalences and multiple loyalties.

Taking up Weißköppel's lead, Roman Loimeier's contribution provides a further illustration of the complex and at times extremely fragile nature of such strategies of survival. His object of study is the mawlid festival in Zanzibar. Mawlid celebrates the birth of the prophet Mohammad. It has been propagated in Zanzibar since the late 19th century. Initially a solemn affair and mainly restricted to the recitation of praise poems in Arabic, from the early 20th century onwards the festival soon became popular across the island, with new forms of mawlid arising celebrated not only on the occasion of the prophet's birthday but throughout the year. As Loimeier points out, the attempts of both socialist and Muslim reformers to eradicate the festival as an expression of superstition and pagan practices did not end its popularity among the local populace, who had begun to utilize it for communal matters such as marriage arrangements. Theological disputes as to the religious righteousness of the festival turned out to be a highly politicized affair in which different and conflicting traditions of learning



were used in order to provide a space in which the festival was able to survive.

While the situation would thus appear to confirm the popular anthropological critique of the cultural nivellation and homogenization thesis seemingly induced by globalization, Dierk Lange warns us that even localization models might be the wrong path to follow. Against the ethnocentric bias of the globalization debate, which tends to always see itself in the global, Lange argues for the recognition of other possible processes. In other words, that which is commonly understood as globalization might not have begun with the incorporation of Africa into the capitalist world system, a process which began in the sixteenth century, but much earlier. Lange's case in point is the festive culture in Ife, the traditional center of the Yoruba in southwest Nigeria. In the ritual organization of the Ife kingdom he identifies structures which point to the preservation of what he calls a "Canaanite creation culture." Lange sees an indicator of the vitality of the kingdom in the preservation of this culture. With respect to the relationship between history, vitality and identity his argument entails an important premise for, according to Lange, vitality and identity need not necessarily match as for example Weißköppel implies. After all, members of the palace in Ife understand themselves and the history of their kingdom not from the perspective of a possible contact with a Canaanite or Phoenician culture. Their cultural identity is a different one. Still the kingdom can – when viewed from the perspective of *longue durée* as Lange does – be considered vital.

## Vitality and Appropriation

In contrast to issues of identity and self-assertion, which dominate the first part of the book, the contributions to the second part explore the theme of vitality mainly with respect to questions of locality and appropriation. Benno Werlen's largely theoretical reflections on space and social action form the beginning. Following a phenomenological approach, Werlen understands space as a formal classificatory concept correlating with different types of action which are themselves oriented on what he calls "world binding" and "everyday geography making." Crucial to these processes are different forms of appropriation – a term Werlen uses interchangeably with regionalization – which he distinguishes along the different domains they seek to gain control over (goal-oriented rational, norm-oriented and communication-oriented). Under globalized conditions the primary feature of these various modes of appropriation appears to lie in the fact that they

now take place over distance. The result is an increased vitality of the local in terms of an increased potential for both innovation and conflict.

Werlen's idea of "geography making" thus comes close to Appadurai's reflections on the "production of locality" (Appadurai 1996), a theme Achim von Oppen focuses on. Based upon long and intensive fieldwork, von Oppen exemplifies how thorough investigations into the issues of history, space and frontiers tell us more about the complex modes by which localities are produced than about the notion of locality as such. In a fascinating study of a concrete locality along the upper Zambezi, he outlines the interface between pre-colonial and colonial and post-colonial modes of production. Against this background he is able to show how the introduction of the territorial model of the colonial state has led to an appropriation of its principles, which has in turn led to a broadening of the social horizons and a localization of ethnicity.

Modes of appropriation are also at the center of the next two contributions by Jigal Beez and Hans Peter Hahn. Jigal Beez's study focuses on the local contextualizations of rice at Mt. Kilimanjaro in Tanzania. Until the early 1980s, coffee was the main cash crop among the Chagga peasants in the region. Through a Japanese sponsored irrigation project, however, coffee was supplanted by rice. Today the production of rice is the peasants' main source of income. Beez explains this development as the successful result of various forms of appropriation. Step by step he distinguishes between different domains which he labels culinary, ritual, technical, social, juridical and economic appropriation, thereby stressing not only the creative and innovative dimension of these processes but also giving substance to Werlen's aforementioned understanding of appropriation as a form of social mastery and control over the different techniques of world binding.

While Beez closely examines the different domains of appropriation Hans Peter Hahn, in his study of global goods and the process of appropriation among the Hausa in Southern Niger and the Kasena in Faso, focuses rather on the various phases of appropriation. Following Silverstone (1992) Hahn differentiates between material appropriation, objectification, incorporation and transformation as subsequent steps of the appropriation process. As Hahn emphasizes, the result of this process is neither final nor is it controllable by the actors themselves. In his view, understanding appropriation as a sign of creativity and local vitality is therefore misleading. Often appropriation leads to a change in the perception of what is considered one's own, a result which again has an effect on one's interactions and relations with things in general. For Hahn it would thus be a mistake to understand vitality as self-assertion since – as a result of the very process of appropriation – what is considered "self" is open to change.

A further skeptical view as to the often found equation of appropriation with creativity and local vitality comes from Harald Sippel and Ulrike Wanitzek. Interested in the study of local land law in peri-urban areas in Dar es Salaam, they point out that the contemporary practice of local land law there resulted from a process of legal syncretization. Far from being vital, however, this syncretization has now turned out to be a “fatal vitality” inasmuch as the corresponding practices are not acknowledged by the Tanzanian state. Rather, legal syncretization has led to a situation of legal insecurity when it comes to matters of land use and land transactions.

Like Sippel and Wanitzek, Werner Graebner too is concerned with the effects of recent Tanzanian politics, and like them he addresses processes of syncretization in Dar es Salaam. Instead of the legal domain, however, his interest is in the changes taking place within the realm of music and performance. Based on his research of the popular performance genre of *taarab*, Graebner argues that far from being “fatally vital,” it is indeed very much alive, even to the extent that it is now transcending its traditional boundaries, expanding both in terms of genre and spatial reach. Graebner contends that the explanations for this vitality lie in the internal re-shifting and restructuring of *taarab* genres, processes he associates with a condition of increased competition to gain the interest of a changing audience. Graebner thus demonstrates that rivalry and competition, contestation and negotiation take place not only between the units compared but also very much within them.

While all contributions mentioned in this section have so far discussed the local appropriation of global elements, Mamadou Diawara, by contrast, focuses on the appropriation of local elements by global actors. The local knowledge of farmers in Mali (former French Sudan) has been used for decades by state agencies. Diawara demonstrates in his paper that French engineers and colonial administrators started exploiting farmers' knowledge as early as the 1930s.

## Vitality and Expansion

Graebner's findings outlined above lead to the third and last section of the book, which focuses on vitality with respect to issues of expansion, rivalry and conflict.

Michael Bollig and Susanne Berzborn's contribution on the effects of indigenous peoples' organizations in southern Africa provides an illuminating insight into the problematic. The main thrust of their argument is to show how the global concern for survival, articulated in various UNESCO

programs and agendas, leads to the formation of NGOs and local strategies of indigenism in an attempt to conform to an international audience's idea of cultural authenticity and threatened minorities. As they point out, in the process of defining local identities for a global arena, local histories, practices and traditions are simplified, homogenized and canonized in favor of a marketable "tribal" tradition. Often these processes are accompanied by a turn to specific economic strategies such as traditional crafts and ritual activities to display the ecologically sensitive and spiritual nature of this tradition. In this context the concept of local vitality tends to transform into a political ideology. Yet the inventiveness with which this ideology is locally employed and appropriated illustrates the active and creative elements behind it.

A vivid example of such a project is given by Peter Probst in his study of heritage politics in the Yoruba town of Osogbo, southwest Nigeria. At the heart of his contribution stand the disputes over the meaning of the Osun grove and festival. Based upon the intimate relationship between the people of Osogbo and their local guardian deity, the Yoruba river goddess Osun, both the grove and the festival have experienced a remarkable transformation. What was fifty years ago still a rather local affair has in the meantime changed and actually expanded into a global event, with thousands of visitors coming regularly from as far as Europe, Latin America and the US to attend the festival and visit the grove. As Probst shows, the reason for this development goes hand in hand with the formation of the global art world, in which Osogbo occupies a prominent role, and the Yoruba diaspora in the US. Rather than focusing on the history and memory scapes created by Western artists and African American transatlantic imaginaries, however, Probst shifts the perspective by not only looking at the strategies used by the Osogbo people to localize and appropriate these scapes and imaginaries, but also by investigating the conflicts resulting from these strategies.

Taken together, both Probst's and Bollig and Berzborn's case studies come close to the position Johannes Fabian takes up in his contribution. Dealing with local Congolese manifestations of the international Charismatic Catholic Renewal of the mid 1980s in Lubumbashi (then Zaire), he sees charismatic activities as part of a generalized African popular culture and thus as a specific "mode of survival." Both embedded in and confronted with a condition of universal commodification, for Fabian the charismatics' renewal was an attempt to come up with new visions and new commitments. Survival under these conditions meant, and here Fabian reemphasizes an argument articulated earlier in his work, that "survival is *staying* alive" (Fabian 1998: 69, *italics original*); it is not a passive perseverance but an active process, "the capacity to carry on with" (Fabian 1998: 69).

With a stunning study stemming from the Nigerian Bible Belt, Asonzeh Ukah's contribution takes up Fabian's link between commoditization and survival. Tracing the various phases of transformation of the Redeemed Christian Church of God (RCCG) from Aladura Christianity through holy evangelicalism to neo-pentecostal prosperity orientation, Ukah focuses on the experience of unbound capitalism as being the main drive for religious vitality in the Bible Belt. As he points out, pentecostal vitality and expansion have been driven more by competition and profit than by spiritual values. Fueled by market forces and an acute interest in capital turnover, the RCCG has become a successful religious enterprise whose pastors live like football and media stars. Yet despite all its demonstrative exhibition of wealth, the prosperity orientation of the Church also provides a network for its members to establish business and social contacts which are later put to use. In Ukah's view, religious vitality thus translates to forms of empowerment and invigoration. Religious ideas and practices are being utilized as techniques of dealing with the "impossibility" of everyday life.

The last two papers by Richard Werbner and Gerd Spittler bring us back from the developments in the urban to the changes taking place in the rural. Werbner's concern is with the spatial expansion of *sedimo*, an oracular cult in Botswana. As he notes, when an ancient cult, once small scale, inward-looking and ethnically closed, expands and transforms over a short period of time in scale, orientation and regional inclusion, the risks to its "staying alive" (as per Fabian) are considerable. In times of greater uncertainty, such as in the face of the HIV / AIDS pandemic, the challenge greatly intensifies. By addressing the difficulties involved, Werbner shows why and with which consequences the "limits of vitality" are negotiated and managed through village-centered cultic transformation extending across town and country.

Lastly, in his contribution on local actions in conquest, resistance, famine and interethnic relations, Gerd Spittler adopts a comparative perspective in order to throw light on the different forms of vitality. Referring to his own sustained fieldwork among the Hausa and Tuareg in Niger, Spittler distinguishes between resistance, self-assertion, appropriation and expansion as constituting four different types of vitality. Since we will refer back to this typology in the next section, it suffices to note that he draws a distinction between vitality and survival. Exemplifying his argument with respect to Tuareg strategies adopted during famine, Spittler states that cultural vitality during famine stands in contrast to survival strategies rather than being part of them. Unlike Fabian, for Spittler survival thus means mere physical survival. Void of either subaltern practices or creative forms to "carry on," it is simply stagnation and retention.

## Between Resistance and Expansion: The Relationality of Forms

As we mentioned at the beginning of this introduction, the theme of cultural or local vitality usually comes to us as an expression of astonishment. As we noted, invoking the metaphor of vitality usually marks a dissent to popular images and understandings of modernity and globalization and the these forces are thought to change and have an effect upon the world we live in. To identify and label cultural phenomena as *vital* thus signifies something unexpected, something beyond the assumed and foreseen.

Having gone through the various contributions to this volume, we need to acknowledge that the astonishment still remains. But its effect has changed from a rather theatrical to a more sober and reflective one, for it now allows us to see the actual challenge the metaphor entails. In this way we are now in a position which enables us not only to situate vitality in a relational manner, a finding which broadens the historical knowledge of our subject considerably. Moreover, the attempt to probe into the notion of local vitality also makes us aware of our implicit assumptions vis-à-vis our subject. But let us start with the issue of relationality.

One finding the various contributions to this volume document is the different types which can be set up when approaching the question of local vitality in Africa. Obviously, identifying types is a complicated matter. Disputes over interpretation are prevalent and, given the recent theoretical shifts in the social sciences, it is perhaps not surprising that one prominent form which dominated in the past is hardly recognizable in the contributions to this volume. Here we are referring to the understanding of vitality as resistance. As we noted above with respect to the debate on peasant societies and village communities, the issue of resistance became a prominent theme in anthropology from the 1950s and 60s onwards. First there was great interest in "open" resistance to the colonial powers. Research concentrated mainly on the period of conquest and the responses to the first years of colonial rule, the so-called "primary resistance movements." Later the focus shifted from open to "passive" resistance (Hyden 1980), "hidden" resistance (Scott 1986), or the "spirit" of resistance (Comaroff 1985).<sup>6</sup> Research was mainly concerned with questions such as "resistance to whom," "strategies of resistance," and "successes and failures of resistance." Here the question as to what was actually preserved by resistance was not focused upon.

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<sup>6</sup> Spittler's own work on "defensive reactions" of peasants in Africa is part of this research tradition. For references see Spittler's contribution in this volume.

The question points to the realm of tradition and identity. Values, norms and institutions can be preserved essentially unchanged. In this case we speak of tradition, preservation, continuity, persistence or conservatism. "Custom is king" was a favorite motto in anthropological research for quite some time. Today interest in this area has faded. But why? Is it because this kind of resistance no longer exists? Or because theoretical fashions have changed? It is interesting to note, and a challenge to us, that these problems continue to interest socio-linguists working in Africa (see the contributions by Owens as well as by Dombrowsky-Hahn and Slezak). What linguists define as vitality comes close to the notion of self-assertion in history and anthropology. While the term was used only rarely during the symposium and the subsequently written contributions to this volume resulting from it, many of the cases presented in the volume can be subsumed hereunder (see for example the contributions by Loimeier, Lange, Beez, and Werbner).

Understood as a process directed at defending one's identity, self-assertion is closely related to current approaches to tradition as something which is constructed, strengthened, revived and hence continuously modified rather than just passively transmitted and handed down. A prominent concept in this context has become that of appropriation. Most anthropologists today see the appropriation of foreign elements as a more important indicator of vitality than resistance to the foreign. In contrast to stubborn resistance, appropriation is seen as a sign of dynamism, creativity, and self-assurance (Werlen, von Oppen, Graebner, Fabian, Bollig and Berzborn). A certain emphasis on voluntary activity prevails, even a kind of inverse dominance (to appropriate in the sense of seizing something, taking possession of it).

As Spittler has emphasized, the process of appropriation of foreign goods begins with "procurement" (Spittler 2002). Today this normally means they are bought, a process which requires that there be enough money available. A method used frequently in the past, though today rather more rarely, is the procurement of goods by robbery. Here, appropriation is equivalent to dispossession of the other side. Where people do not have the means of procuring goods in reality, they can do so at least in their imaginations and the realm of the subjunctive.<sup>7</sup> Yet most anthropologists are not interested in the procurement of goods, but accept this as given. Their interest in appropriation starts from the moment when the goods have already passed into the ownership of a person, where they are modified and adapted. The meaning of these goods then becomes subject to a new interpretation. For

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<sup>7</sup> Studio photography in Africa bears eloquent witness to this; see Wendl and Behrend (1998).

example, sunglasses are adopted by the Tuareg not, as we might assume, as protection from the sun, but as protection from other people. In this case sunglasses reinforce the veiling of Tuareg men. Local actors are thus not the end receivers of a diffusion process, but participate actively in the shaping of the world around them.<sup>8</sup>

Surely, restrictions and issues of power remain. After all, when we speak about local vitality we think first and foremost of resistance, self-assertation and appropriation in relation to more powerful units. Yet, as a number of the contributions to this volume illustrate, local vitality can mean expansion as well. As Owens quotes a popular local comment with respect to the linguistic situation in Northern Nigeria: "Hausa has eaten Maiduguri." The spread of certain languages at the expense of others is thus just one example. Religious and economic expansion beyond the local market, with export into other regions, other countries (as exemplified by the studies of Ukah, Fabian and Probst), is another. Last but not least, conquest is still another form of local vitality (see Spittler). Whether migration represents a form of expansion or not depends on the context. A migration of refugees can probably not be designated expansion. Yet the same cannot be said of migrants who push aside the native population and begin to dominate their culture.

Taken together, the four forms of local vitality we have identified above, namely resistance, self-assertion, appropriation and expansion, need to be seen in relation to and interdependent with one another. Even though at first sight all of them would seem to be mutually exclusive, with for example resistance meaning the rejection of foreign influences, and appropriation the acceptance of foreign things and ideas, in reality the two are very often combined. In order to oppose foreign influence effectively, people have to appropriate foreign technology. In order to appropriate foreign consumer goods in a creative way instead of imitating a foreign culture, a process of self-assertion must first have taken place. To incorporate all these different features into one general approach, obviously what we need is a historically informed relational perspective, something which takes up the challenge to formulate a reasonably comprehensive view of the relative dynamics of larger social and territorial entities than those the discipline conventionally deals with. But the relationality of forms also challenges us to rethink

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<sup>8</sup> This is an important correction to popular notions of localization, especially when they are dressed in the metaphor of "closure" (Geschiere and Meyer 1998). As Anna Tsing (2000) has pointed out, the concept of localization tends to imply a kind of finalization, an end process, as if the "work of culture" (Obeyesekere 1990) stopped when entering the realm of the local. Given that warning, this is not to say that local actors are totally free in what they do. On the contrary, it almost goes without saying, to the extent that most of the authors don't even bother to mention it (see, however, Fabian in this volume), that they are not. (See also Holtzman 2004).



vitality with regard to the assumptions we have vis-à-vis our subjects when we use this term.

## Dubious Assumptions

Let us come back to the ethnolinguistic vitality theory (ELVT) for this matter, which served as a starting point for our interest in probing into the notion of local vitality. As it turned out, one basic problem in the application of ELVT concerned the question of comparison. After all ELVT compares units of the same order, i.e. languages. There may be a hierarchy of languages, but they are all languages. When we compare ethnic groups, such as Hausa and Tuareg, we may have a parallel case, for we are comparing units with similar structures, in this case ethnic groups. Comparing classes would be another example. Here we have a clear ranking. But still the units are structurally of the same type. When we talk and write about local vitality in relation to the outside world, however, we often have another type of relation in mind where the units are structurally different.

The relation between extra-local influences and local reactions has often been discussed in the social sciences. Accordingly, the spectrum of concepts developed to capture this situation is broad, ranging from the relation between great and little tradition, nation-state and tribe, state and village, center and periphery, capitalist economy and subsistence economy to the relation between citizen and subject; or the global and the local, to mention just one of the more recent conceptual pairs in this context. All these cases have one thing in common: The units in relation are structurally different from one another. The nation-state is not only larger than the tribe but is structurally different; the capitalist economy is not only larger than the subsistence economy but of a completely different structure. Normally these different structures imply a difference in power and prestige as well.

Given anthropology's commitment to confronting and subverting generalized assumptions often expressed as "common sense" (Herzfeld 2001), perhaps the real astonishment when it comes to an evaluation of the question of local vitality is the way the issue sheds light on what perhaps might best be labeled the field's contradictory common sense. That is, we seem to prefigure our subjects towards a principal weakness. When we ask about local vitality, we are asking about the vitality of weak units in the face of structurally different and more powerful ones. Thus our interest lies not in principally strong but weak actors. We ask ourselves how vitally they can stand their ground in the face of powerful counterparts. On the other hand,

uneasy with the problematic of such a perspective, we are constantly seeking to call this assumption into question.

To clarify our point: By stressing anthropology's implicit bias of considering its subjects principally weak, we do not mean to deny the often noted "postcolonial predicaments" members of African societies face all over the continent. No doubt the "limits of vitality," as Werbner has dubbed them in his contribution to this volume, do exist, but the question remains whether the subjects we are focusing on can and need to be seen only in terms of subjection and subjugation.<sup>9</sup> Here the issue of local vitality, as provocatively quaint as our attempt to pursue the notion of vitality beyond its metaphorical usage may seem to some, has the merit of challenging this view.

A case in point is the symptomatic silence when it comes to the question of "rural vitality." In this volume local vitality has been identified and described primarily as an urban phenomenon. To argue that this is simply the result of the authors' research in cities is only partly correct. Rather the over-representation of the urban mirrors the current research interest in general. Most often the urban population in Africa is seen as being more dynamic and vital than its rural counterpart. African popular culture, often the major argument in the various attempts to counter Afro-pessimism, is almost by definition not only urban but also creative and vital (see Karin Barber's remarks cited at the beginning of the introduction). When it comes to the rural remainder, the answer is most often silence. While popular, i.e. urban culture is said to constitute a counter site, a Foucauldian "heterotopia" (cf. Rowe and Schelling 1991), rural culture is conceptualized most often not in terms of creative resistance but in terms of being concerned with survival. Yet survival in rural areas can in certain contexts just as well be interpreted as an expression of a specific peasant vitality.<sup>10</sup> The peasants are those who, in the face of an ever-changing outside world, have kept their way of life for centuries. It is in this sense that the word survival is used by John Berger (1979) in his naturalistic descriptions of rural life in the French Alps, as is the case when Ted C. Lewellen (2002) uses it in attempting to provide an outline of a possible *Anthropology of Globalization*.

In his chapter *Peasants: Survivors in a Global World*, Lewellen uses a passage taken from Berger's *Pig Earth* as a motto for his own argument. "The peasantry everywhere can be defined as a class of survivors . . . The word survivor has two meanings. It denotes somebody who has survived an ordeal. And it denotes a person who has continued to live when others dis-

<sup>9</sup> See also Werbner's (2002) critical remarks on this point.

<sup>10</sup> See for example Eric Wolf's (1969) classic study on *Peasant Wars of the Twentieth Century*, wherein he analyzed the role of peasants as political actors in the revolutionary wars in Mexico, Russia, China and Vietnam.

appeared or perished” (Lewellen 2002: 217). Based upon his own research among Peruvian peasants, Lewellen argues that in times of globalization peasants neither lead an isolated existence nor do they disappear. Rather, as they have done for centuries, they continuously open up to the outer world economically as well as culturally, without losing their identity as peasants. In their own self-understanding they were, they are and they will remain *campesinos*.

Statements like this one throw a critical light on the aforementioned weakness anthropology tends to ascribe to its subjects. They also point the explanatory mileage the metaphor of vitality still entails, even if that mileage might be restricted to the mere challenge the metaphor poses to our own anthropological common sense.

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## Appendix

### **Between Resistance and Expansion: Explorations of Local Vitality in Africa**

Eds.: Peter Probst and Gerd Spittler  
Beiträge zur Afrikaforschung  
Lit Verlag: Berlin, Hamburg, Münster 2005.

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